DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 384 869 CS 214 929

AUTHOR	Dyson, Anne Haas
TITLE	Children Out of Bounds: The Power of Case Studies in Expanding Visions of Literacy Development.
INSTITUTION	National Center for the Study of Writing and Literacy, Berkeley, CA.; National Center for the Study of Writing and Literacy, Pittsburgh, PA.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.; Spencer Foundation, Chicago, Ill.
REPORT NO	CSW-TR-73
PUB DATE	Jun 95
CONTRACT	R117G10036
NOTE	38p.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research/Technical (143)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Case Studies; *Childrens Writing; Cooperation; *Ethnography; Individual Development; *Literacy; *Research Methodology; Writing Research; Young Children
IDENTIFIERS	*Emergent Literacy; *Researcher Role

ABSTRACT

This paper shows that constructing or writing a case study is a dialogic process, one that requires the researcher to define and redefine his or her research boundaries. The paper elaborates, first, on the process of constructing a case and, second, on the particular process of constructing cases of children learning written language. It highlights the use of interpretive methodologies, such as those of C. Geertz and F. Erickson, to construct cases; such methodologies probe how specific people, in specific social circumstances, interpret or make sense of their everyday interactions. The paper then offers examples of 3 cases written successively over a 15-year period. Collectively, these cases illustrate the methodological dynamics of case studies, the ways in which they may force an observer both to articulate conceptual boundaries and to go beyond them. Finally, in the concluding section, the paper considers the potential for case studies to cross distinctive professional boundaries, so that practitioners with mutual interests can be brought into a common conversation about the young. It also considers the limits imposed on that potential when studies become prescriptive or normative guides. (Contains 59 references and 5 figures.) (TB)

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National Center for the Study of Writing

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To appear in J. Flood, S.B. Heath, & D. Lapp (Eds.), *A Handbook for Literacy Educators: Research on Teaching the Communicative and Visual Arts.*

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The publication of this report was supported under the Educational Research and Development Center Program (R117G10036 for the National Center for the Study of Writing) as administered by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education. The findings and opinions expressed in this report do not reflect the position or policies of the Office of Educational Research and Improvement or the U.S. Department of Education.

This publication was produced on an Apple Macintosh IIsi computer with portrait display monitor and an Apple LaserWriter IIntx printer donated to the National Center for the Study of Writing by Apple Computer, Inc.

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Children Out of Bounds: The Power of Case Studies in Expanding Visions of Literacy Development

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"You're not supposed to leave the underworld," screams Liliana (alias Venus) at Sammy (alias Pluto). The third graders are playing Greek gods. They have named the boundaries of the relevant worlds, and Sammy is clearly out of bounds. He is supposed to be on the sand by the climbing structure, not on the grass by the fence.

"But I'm good now," he pleads, trying to redefine himself. He is tired of the lonely and hot underworld and longing for the more sociable and tree-shaded space guarded by the firm Liliana.

Out on the playground, children claim and define spaces, be their game Greek gods or kick ball, cops-'n-robbers or hop scotch. And, of course, who's "in" and who's "out" is often a matter of contention. In many ways, this same task of establishing and maintaining boundaries faces adults who construct case studies, that is, studies of "bounded systems" in all their dynamic complexity (Stake, 1988, p. 256). The case might be a particular community, group, or, of particular interest in this report, individual. Whatever the unit, however, the "case" has a way of going out of bounds, forcing the observer to reconsider the designated spaces.

Consider, for example, another scene involving 8-year-old Sammy, a "case" in an ongoing qualitative study; the "bounded system"—the particular human experience being studied—is that of learning to write.

> Sammy is sitting with bowed head and, I expect, bowed heart as well. He had looked forward all morning to Author's Theater, when his classmates would act out his story. But all had not gone well, especially with Michael. Sammy had written the death of a superhero—an untenable text, according to Michael. Unable to ignore Sammy's misery, I tell him that just because Michael didn't like his story doesn't mean Michael doesn't like him. But Sammy is not buying this—and neither is his peer Makeda sitting beside him.
>
> Makeda: But a story is kinda like *your* life. It's like it's kinda like it's what you're doing and they're doing.... [to Sammy] Just say, "Oh yeah, I'm gonna get you. I'm not gonna be your friend no more. If you don't like my story, I don't like your story either." But *ignore* them when they're talking to you. That's what I do. Like Lettrice say, "I don't like your story." I say, "I don't like your story either. And I'm not your friend any more. And I'm going to ignore you next time." So she never did mess with me. (pause) She saw my big

> brother, she never did mess with me. She tried to get her whole gang on me, so I got my big brother. So that's what happened.

And Sammy and Makeda go to lunch.

I had begun by observing one child's writing but, soon, was enmeshed in a complex social drama featuring many children and the wider classroom and societal contexts in which their acts, and their writing, gained meaning. Moreover, I was attending to symbols other than the written marks on the page; as Sammy's story was enacted, discussed, argued about, and literally cried over, its personal and public meaning was mediated through many symbolic forms—spoken words as well as written ones, dramatic movement and expressive gestures, and, potentially, illustrative drawings and decorative book designs.

Understanding Sammy's evolving history as a "writer" has demanded, therefore, that the conceptual boundaries—or definitions—of writing and of development be drawn in ways that accommodate his complex experience. And that experience forces me as observer to attend to children other than Sammy, to symbols other than written ones. In this report, I explore the way in which the intense study of individual experience can destabilize, not physical playground boundaries, but *conceptual* ones, and thereby allow new perspectives. Constructing or writing a case is a dialogic process, one that involves defining and redefining one's understandings. Moreover, this process may be enacted on a broader level when completed cases enter the public dialogue of professional gatherings and published accounts.

In the following sections, I first elaborate on the process of constructing a case and, second, the particular process of constructing cases of children learning written language. I highlight the use of interpretive methodology to construct cases (Geertz, 1973; Erickson, 1986); this methodology probes how specific people, in specific social circumstances, interpret or make sense of their everyday interactions. I then offer the case of three cases written successively over a fifteen-year period; collectively, these cases illustrate the methodological dynamics of case studies, the ways in which they may force an observer both to articulate conceptual boundaries and to go beyond them, to go out of bounds, as it were. Finally, in the concluding section, I consider the potential of case studies for crossing another kind of boundary, those that separate the diverse professionals concerned with children's lives (Florio-Ruane, 1991; Genishi, 1992)—and I consider as well the limits imposed on that potential when such studies become prescriptive or normative guides.

In recent years, startling statistics have proclaimed the challenges facing our schools, especially schools like Sammy's, schools serving poor children in urban and rural settings. In its annual yearbooks, The Children's Defense Fund (e.g., 1994) presents the shameful statistics: the number of children living in poverty, labeled as "unready" for school, as "academically behind," and, eventually, as "dropouts." Of what importance, then, are the experiences of one child? of what worth the hours, months, and, indeed, years that may be spent constructing a small number of cases? These, ultimately, are the questions addressed herein.

CONSTRUCTING A CASE: THE WORK OF DEFINITIONS AND DETAILS

Insight into the nature and the value of case construction comes, interestingly, from a biologist, Barbara McClintock. She was, wrote Stephen Gould (1987), committed to "following the peculiarities of individuals, not the mass properties of millions" (p. 167), and to tracing their complex interactions with each other and their environment—a commitment all the more intriguing because McClintock followed stalks of corn. In her own words, spoken to her biographer Evelyn Keller, one must understand

> how it [each plant] grows, understand its parts, understand when something is going wrong with it. [An organism] isn't just a piece of plastic, it's something that is constantly being affected by the environment, constantly showing attributes or disabilities in its growth ... No two plants are exactly alike.... I start with the seedling and I don't want to leave it. I don't feel I really know the story if I don't watch the plant all the way along. So I know every plant in the field. I know them intimately and I find it a great pleasure to know them. (cited in Gould, 1987, pp. 167-168)

McClintock was interested in the ways information is passed on through genes, not through language, and in biological actions and reactions—processes microscopically removed from the interpretive processes of most people's everyday lives. Still, her words and her concerns are relevant here, for they speak of the importance of theoretical definitions and empirical details.

Negotiating Theoretical Boundaries

McClintock followed the narrative thread of an individual, intent on understanding a phenomenon—the workings of biological inheritance and development. Her story disputed the notion of a simplistic, one-way flow of information, from genome, to RNA, to DNA; and it revealed a fluid and mobile process, one filled with "hierarchical systems of regulation and control" and surprising reversals, including information entering the genome from the outside environment (as it does in AIDS) (Gould, 1987, p. 159). A single organism reverberates in an environment and, in the process, reveals the complexity within and without and highlights potentially critical points of contact (of, to stretch a word, negotiation) with that environment.

McClintock, then, speaks about respect for bounded complexity, about attention to its unfolding story, and, thus, about cases. The singular defining feature of any case is, in fact, its boundedness (Geertz, 1973; Stake, 1988). Some unit of integrity (a person, a group, a community) is both outlined and contained by a researcher, who is studying, not the case itself, but a case of *something*, some phenomenon (e.g., not maize, but biological inheritance).

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Thus, the researcher is constantly making decisions about what is, or is not, within the constructed bounds, what is, or is not, relevant to such a case.

Inherent in this process of bounding is one critical challenge—and strength—of case study analysis: the need, in the midst of the flow of unbounded experience, to make decisions about basic definitions of what exactly is being bound. Writing of anthropological cases of communities, Clifford Geertz grapples with the same strength and challenge:

> The locus of study is not the object of study.... You can study different things in different places, and some things ... you can best study in confined localities.... It is with the kind of material produced by ... almost obsessively fine-comb field study ... that the mega-concepts with which contemporary social science is afflicted—legitimacy, modernization, integration, conflict ... meaning—can be given the sort of sensible actuality that makes it possible to think not only realistically and concretely *about* them, but, what is more important, creatively and imaginatively *with* them. (1973, p. 23)

In interpretive research, one aims to understand some aspect of human experience and, given its complexity and, indeed, its abstractness, one needs to situate that experience within people's actions and reactions to the materiality, the local specificity, of their everyday worlds.

Working definitions in any one study *are* influenced by previous studies, where concepts were defined and elaborated. But the focus of the moment (i.e., the learning child in the viewing frame) exerts an influence as well. For the definitions arrived at must seem sensible (given the child's actions and reactions), just as McClintock's definitions had to allow for the actions and reactions of the maize. Thus, case studies have the potential to contribute new understandings of the concepts under study. In this report, the experience to be understood, to be conceived and reconceived, is that of learning to write.

Detailing Lived Experience

Implicit in the textual construction of a human actor is a second strength and challenge, one that highlights intentional *mind*, not genetic matter—the need to enter into, and try to understand, another's consciousness, another's world. And those "others" may be persons whose agency, whose actions and reactions, are often lost in a collective word that distances and dismisses (like "the masses" of the so-called Third World [Sahni, 1994] and "the at-risk" of the affluent one) or, in contrast, in a singular word that homogenizes and diminishes (like "the child" [Thorne, 1987]).

This strength, however, contains within it a potential weakness, the possibility of looking, not to understand, but to confirm what is "known," research reduced to illustrative anecdote of truths already held. Researchers, after all, are not ventriloquists (Geertz, 1988). They do not speak for others. They are writers who construct others' lives. Researchers' own life experiences and social positioning—their age, gender, ethnicity, indeed, their very status as outsider, "both enable and inhibit particular kinds of insight" (Rosaldo, 1989, p. 19).

But, as writers, they *can* work to make another's life world more perceptible, more accessible, by respecting the details of that world, the recurring themes and rhythms of the other's life scenes. Such respect entails time and presence—and painstaking re-living, as scrawled field notes are typed out, voice-packed audiotapes transcribed, and crumpled child papers are smoothed over again and again. And it also entails depicting the other's actions in descriptive words, rather than glossing them with abstractions like "competent," or not, "cooperative," or not, "motivated," or not; observers attend to the contextual specifics—the who's, what's, where's, and when's—of others' actions, attempting to grasp *their* value judgments, their interpretations (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992).

Observers do, of course, have their own feelings about and reactions to the observed. Indeed, for both observing researchers (Ottenberg, 1990) and teachers (Almy & Genishi, 1979; Florio-Ruane, 1989), those reactions and feelings are a potentially rich source of hypotheses about the other. It is this need to acknowledge but interrogate—literally bracket in one's notes—such responses that accounts, at least in part, for the self knowledge that may accompany attempts to understand others. For example, one might ask, who do I (and other participants in the scene) assume is competent or not? On the basis of what kinds of actions in what settings, using language to accomplish what purposes in what ways? What does this concept, *competence*, mean here?

Through such a dialogic process of considering and reconsidering the taken-for-granted, researchers seek a "textual connection," as Geertz (1988, p. 144) writes, a "common ground between the Written At and the Written About." That is, they use the limits of their own life experiences to understand another's. Thus, like its aesthetic cousin the literary text, the interpretive case has the potential to reveal "dimensions of ... experience that are ordinarily invisible," to "hear aspects of it ordinarily lost in silence" (Greene, 1988, p. 19). This potential for seeing new dimensions of experience connects this second challenge with the first, the potential to go beyond old assumptions and conceptual boundaries, through, in McClintock's words, "the pleasure of know[ing] another."

STUDYING YOUNG WRITERS: THE BASICS OF LITERACY AND GROWTH

In studying literacy development, researchers face very basic definitional questions. Most important, perhaps, is: What is "it" that develops? What is reading, writing, or literacy? Where does one look for "it"? What boundaries should be drawn around "it"?

In the opening anecdote about Sammy, for example, is his writing in the *graphics* (e.g., Clay, 1975), in the exact words he formed on the page? Or is it in the *orthographics* (e.g., Read, 1975), in the linking of graphic signifier with signified in systematic ways? Or, maybe it is in Sammy's *process* (e.g., Graves, 1975), his planning of a message and his monitoring and revising of its objectified form. Yet another possibility: writing could be his *discourse or genre form* (e.g., Newkirk, 1987), his story—or, maybe, it's a *functional tool* at work in a particular *cultural event* (e.g., Heath, 1983), one involving the specifics of who, to whom, with what message and form, in what place and time, and, of course, for what reason. Or maybe writing is in the ideology of the society as a whole, its *societal discourse* (e.g., Gilbert, 1994); Sammy and Michael have different expectations about what can and cannot be written in the context of a superhero story—and Makeda has clear notions about what can or cannot be said about another's story (or at least about the stories of authors with big brothers).

In other words, should an observer attend primarily to the writing on the paper? the behavioral evidence of individual mind at work? the enactment of writing as social happening and cultural activity? or, perhaps, the textual constituents of ideological beliefs about what can or cannot be said by whom? Moreover, these questions can be asked from different perspectives. Sammy, Sammy's friends and family, his teacher, and his adult-friend (the researcher) may all have different ways of defining what it means to write.

And as if these issues were not challenging enough, there are basic issues to be addressed about "development" as well. Again, what and where is it? Moreover, what sort of developmental pathway should one prepare to follow? Is growth a linear unfolding? a zig-zagging phenomenon? a moving away from social supports? a gradual integration into social life? Perhaps, to construct a case of Sammy's development, one should focus on outer signs of his internal concepts of "writing," looking for evidence of his mental grappling with unexpected information and unintended consequences (e.g., Ferreiro, 1978). Or, maybe one builds a case around collaborative encounters between Sammy and his teacher or more skilled peers, examining ways relative experts provide guidance (e.g., Snow, 1983)? Or perhaps one should not assume singular teachers but make space for multiple co-participants in his writing activities and for changes in his way of participating with those others (e.g., Dyson, 1993a).

Over the last 25 years, researchers have conceptualized differently the mechanisms or processes of development, the desirable end goals, and the nature of expected pathways. And thus they have looked in different places for writing, both on and off the page. Reviews of expanding definitions of literacy (e.g., Nystrand, Greene, & Wiemelt, 1993) and of development (e.g., Bruner & Haste, 1987) can be found elsewhere. The point herein is that it is these sorts of definitions that undergird researchers' ways of drawing boundaries around, and paying attention to, children; such definitions influence what is foregrounded and what is left in the background, what is carefully detailed and what is glossed. And, conversely, it is the details—the descriptions of children's "dailyness" (Polakow, 1992)—that in turn may challenge the viewing frame itself.

In writing cases, researchers must deal with the dangling threads—the child actions and reactions that cannot be understood, that suggest the need to refocus, to clarify and, sometimes, to redefine. Indeed, one theoretical perspective portrays the act of writing itself as a struggle with given words (like "literacy" and "development"). Writing is dialogic, argues Bakhtin (1981, 1986); it not only mediates interactions between writers and their audiences, it also mediates between writers' minds and the collective mind of the discourse community that has given them their words. Thus, in constructing cases, writers negotiate with available words, stretching them, rethinking them, aiming to make them "fit" their data. And then, through publications like *A Handbook for Literacy Educators* (the book in which this report will appear), they participate in the process of figuring out what can legitimately be said about "writing" and "development" within the circle of people concerned about children and literacy.

UNRAVELING CASES

To illustrate the methodological dynamics of case study construction, I present abbreviated forms of three cases: those of Rachel, Jake, and Tina. The cases were all constructed from transcripts, collected products, and observational notes and, within each, child use of imaginative narrative discourse is highlighted. The children themselves were from similar sociocultural backgrounds (i.e., urban children whose heritage was predominantly African American, and whose socioeconomic circumstance was primarily working class); they were all given to imaginative storytelling, all had complex relationships with peers—and all were singularly complex people.

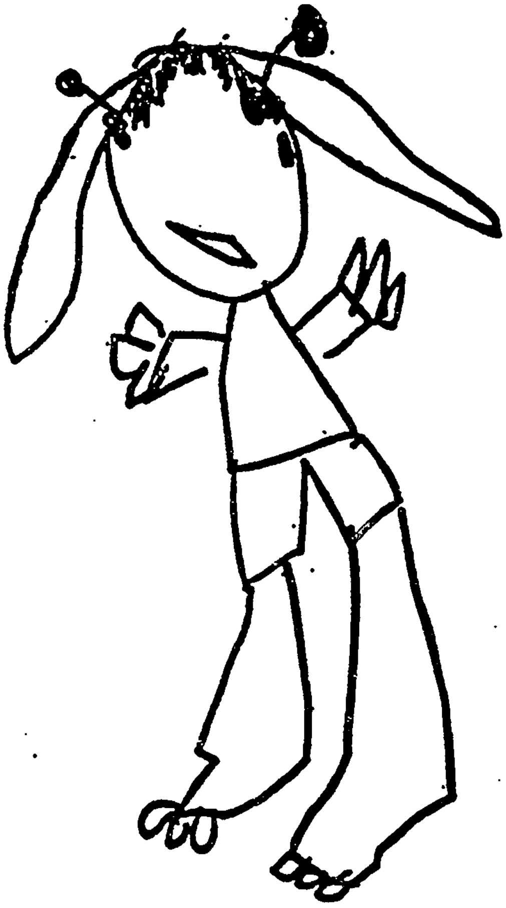
The children are of different ages: Rachel was just 5, Jake was 6, and Tina (a classmate of Sammy's) was 7. The point of this analysis, however, is not to trace developmental patterns from child to child; rather, it is to examine the definitions, the viewing frame, that shaped each construction—and how that frame was complicated by the case itself. I chose these three from a larger set of 30, because they engendered clear and distinctive conceptual shifts. Tina, the most recent case, is presented most fully, but her case is set within the context of the preceding two.

For each case, I provide situational context, an edited sample of the case, details of analysis tools, and, finally, the conceptual understandings *and* puzzles yielded by the completed study. Collectively, the cases illustrate the boundary negotiation—and the theoretical re-envisioning—possible through sustained attention to the unfolding stories of children's lives.

Rachel: Writing as Symbol System

The research focus on the first of these cases, that of Rachel, was very close, the viewing boundaries very tightly set. A pictorial metaphor for the case study of Rachel might be this picture by Rachel herself: the single child in the viewing frame (see Figure 1).

Rachel



"Let me show you how you write myself

[i.e., how you draw me]."

Figure 1. Framing Rachel.

Rachel may well be half-way through college now, but I met her in kindergarten. She was one of five focal children in a study of young children's writing (Dyson, 1981, 1983). There was no child writing in her classroom, which had been designated my site by the school district. So I set up a classroom writing center and invited the children simply to come write, however and whatever they wanted.

The center was not organized by any particular classroom social structure (other than as an optional individual choice during "free" activity time); there were no classroom expectations guiding what was produced, nor any social forums through which ways of talking about writing might become routinized. As individual choice, a dominant purpose for most children at the center was to explore the medium itself. The children would arrange and rearrange known letters and letter-like forms on their papers, asking me if they'd quite done "it" yet (i.e., written anything that could be read); and they also spent quite a bit of time writing known (or guessed at) names of important people in their lives. Most importantly, the children talked a great deal, to themselves, to me, and to each other. As researcher, I was drawn to this talk and, thus, the specific question guiding the project became, what role does children's *oral* language play in their early *written* efforts?

Of all the regular child visitors to the center, Rachel stood out for her people-oriented personality; she was a mover and a shaker in the kindergarten scene. Relative to her peers, she was much more likely to use the writing center for the production of dramatic adventures. Now I would think of her as a performer in search of an audience (and I was convenient). Then I approached her primarily as a child writer; I asked what, how, and why she wrote and what role her talking—and Rachel was a talker—had in her efforts.

The drama—and the dramas—of Rachel. The following event is representative of how Rachel wrote a story and, also, of how I narrated the case of Rachel:

> Rachel is composing an elaborate story about 2 feuding sisters, one in a series of stories about sisters who are always together but always at odds (just as Rachel describes her own relationship with her 7-year-old sister Julie). Rachel's dominant composing media are pictures and dramatic dialogue and gesture. As her picture takes shape, she acts out a scene in which one sister has just locked the other out of the house.
>
> Rachel: "Sister, open up the door. [Rachel knocks twice on the table.] You dummy. Sister, you better come and open this door or else I'm gonna throw this pumpkin shell on your head—"
>
> Quite suddenly, Rachel has a plan:
>
> That's what it's gonna be saying!
>
> Rachel now writes the "teeny tiny" print-like markings, all in a line, in the uppermost left-hand side of her paper (see Figure 2). The writing, though small, stands for the loud orders and threats of the sister on the outs:

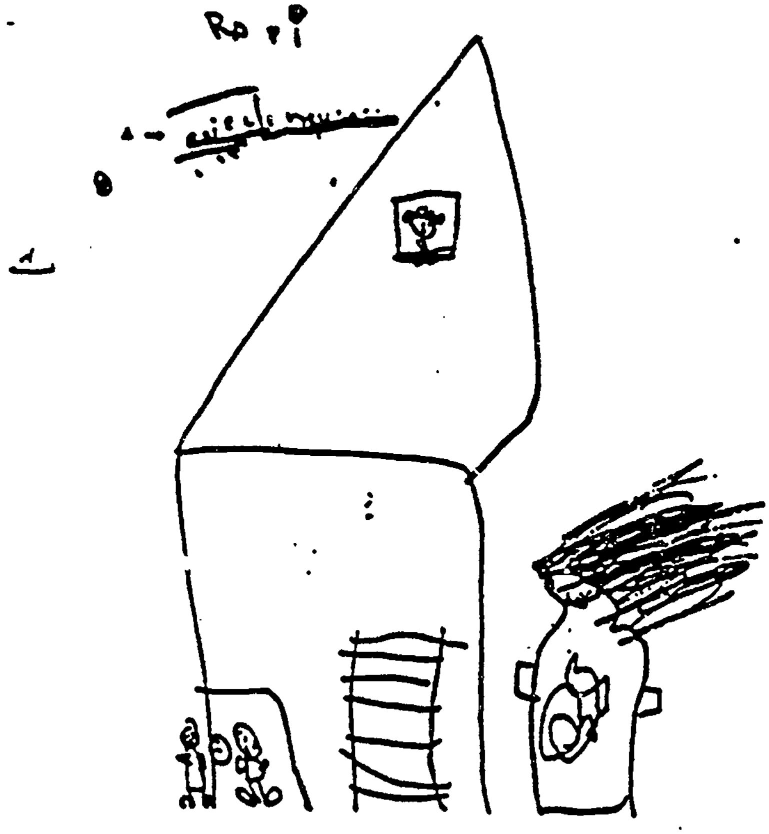


Figure 2. Rachel's feuding sisters.

> It says, "Open the door, Sister. Open, open, open, else I'm gonna throw this pumpkin shell right on your head."

Later, Rachel explains to me (her so-called observer but, in this event, her audience) that she wrote little "'cuz I wanted you to try to guess."

Rachel did not always use such unconventional writing. Sometimes, her intention involved the more limited writing of names (e.g., a "note" or "letter," containing a picture and the addressee's name, or a list for "mommy so she'll know all of my friends' names that was over here"). In those cases, her letters were legible and her words quite readable. For elaborate stories, though, pictures, dramatic talk, and "teeny tiny" writing were the favored media.

Defining the viewing frame: Analytic tools. From much observing and taping of events like the story of the feuding sisters, file boxes began to fill with observational notes, transcripts, and child products. Using such diverse materials to construct a case requires a vocabulary or coding system, a way of describing the dimensions of the "bounded system" (e.g., the child's experience of writing); in this project, it required a means for describing how the children went about writing and the role of talk in that writing.

The nature of such a vocabulary is dependent upon those basic questions earlier discussed, including, what is writing? Where, in the mass of data, is it located? In the academic dialogue of the late seventies, researchers emphasized the graphic and orthographic features of early writing (e.g., Bissex, 1980; Clay, 1975; Read, 1975) and the decision-making processes involved in crafting information on paper (e.g., Graves, 1975).

These definitions suggest that a researcher should focus on a child's ways of shaping (i.e., of planning, encoding, and monitoring) inner meanings in written forms and, also, the nature of the resulting forms. Thus, I constructed Rachel's case—and that of four other children—by describing her actions as she crafted meanings on paper. And to do so, I developed an analytic vocabulary or category system that included four "components" of a child's writing process: *formulating a message, encoding the message, mechanically formulating letters or letter-like forms on paper*, and *decoding [or rereading] the message*. Accompanying each component was a list of "properties" or qualities that captured child variation in ways of enacting these components.

For example, in Rachel's feuding sisters story, the formulated message was *specific* (i.e., Rachel did not simply say "This is gonna say something about my sister.") and *coherent* (i.e., related to the other graphic marks, including the drawing, on the page). Her encoding was not *systematic* (e.g., Rachel was not using any evident orthographic system); and her forms were not *conventional*, although they were *linearly* arranged. In rereading, Rachel did not *segment her written message* (i.e., match portions of her oral message to her written one). On the other hand, in writing her lists, Rachel's specific message was systematically encoded (based on visual recall, however, rather than any sound/symbol matching), and her forms conventional.

In addition to writing process components, the category system included descriptors for the *functions* of children's talk. For example, in Rachel's feuding sister story, talk served primarily to *represent* or narrate the story, although it also served to *evaluate* (i.e., to express Rachel's attitude toward the world, particularly the obnoxious behavior of sisters) and to *interact* (e.g., to ask me to attend to her story). It served minimally to help her *encode* (e.g., to help transfer oral symbols to written ones through "sounding out") or to *seek information* (e.g., to seek spellings).

Uneasy answers: Rachel pushes the boundaries. Analyses of all children's visits to the center, and fine-grained analyses of the focal children's writing and talking, led to tentative conclusions. Talk, it seemed, was initially something young children do *about* writing (i.e., "This is my mama's name"), rather than something young children encode *in* their writing. Over time, children's speech becomes both writing's raw material and its guiding tool—young children use speech to monitor and encode their ideas. Thus, their writing becomes more able to stand on its own, independent of any accompanying talk.

This suggested developmental pattern fit with the then dominant definition of development (i.e., development is an orderly transformation of child behavior, reflecting underlying changes in conceptual systems [Piaget & Inhelder, 1969]). Moreover, it was also compatible with the dominant view of writing development. That development was a moving apart, a child learning to articulate and manipulate meaning without support from the immediate material and social context (Olson, 1977). The sense of such a portrayal was dependent upon the viewing frame, upon those tight boundaries drawn around individual children and their writing processes.

But such narrow tight boundaries could not quite contain the lively Rachel. As composer, Rachel did much more than write—she also drew and dramatized. The roots of her eventual accomplishments as a story writer could not be in that line of teeny tiny writing alone. Moreover, her composing processes, like that of all the children, were highly variable but related to her end goal. Her action on the page could not be understood separately from her intention in the world.

Finally, those narrowly drawn boundaries were also at odds with the project's methodology. Such boundaries implied a telescopic perspective on children, an attempt to make sense of their behavior from the faraway viewpoint of the adult world. But *interpretive* methodology aims to situate child behavior within the meaningful webs of present aims and social connections. The next case, that of Jake, continued to fray the edges of the existent conceptual boundaries.

Jake: Writing as Mediational Tool

The project involving Jake aimed to examine one of the dangling threads from the study described above—the drawing, storytelling, and dramatic gestures that seemed to serve as the developmental roots of conventional writing at least as much as, if not more so than, lines of child mock writing

(Dyson, 1989). The project initially focused on eight focal children's use of multiple media in their composing and how their use of these media changed over time. But the situational context of this project was quite different from that of Rachel's, and its local particulars helped shape the unfolding project in general—and the unfolding story of Jake in particular.

Jake's school was a small magnet school of 80 children, kindergartners through third graders. All of the children had the same language arts teacher (Margaret), and they all participated in a daily journal time. As part of that journal time, the children shared their written texts, and Margaret led the children in appreciatory talk about individuals' accomplishments as artists and composers. Thus, individual children's ways of writing were shaped by—and were shaping—the literacy life of the school as a whole; my own role as instigator and interactional partner during writing time was minimal. For example, the children did not ask me, "What did I write?" to quote Clay (1975); very quickly, most of the youngest children began to emulate the story writing of the oldest ones.

During the first year of this two-year project, Jake was a first grader—a talkative, outgoing one. Despite his own sense of being "slow" in learning to read and write, he was highly engaged during journal time. Like Rachel, he composed dramatic stories, primarily by drawing and talking. His stories, though, were not about relationships but about fast-paced adventures, often involving speedy vehicles, and clashes between the good guys and bad guys. Moreover, the stories were not used to gain the attention of an adult interested in children's writing; they were used to gain the attention of his peers, especially his "straight man," so to speak, the calm, quiet, and artistic Manuel.

The drama—and the dramas—of Jake. The following event illustrates Jake's propensity toward wild adventures, his playfulness, and, most especially, his delight in teasing his friend Manuel. The event centers on the drawing in Figure 3.

Jake has just drawn the ground and the sky and—

Jake: Now I'm gonna make a mechanical man.

Manuel, sensible and calm, seeks some clarification:

Manuel: A mechanical man? You mean a robot man?

Jake: Yeah, I'm gonna make a robot man. You got it, Manuel.

Jake begins to elaborate in his talk and in his picture:

Jake: Here's a bomb head. It's gonna explode. It hasn't even exploded yet. When it does—

Manuel's a bit concerned:

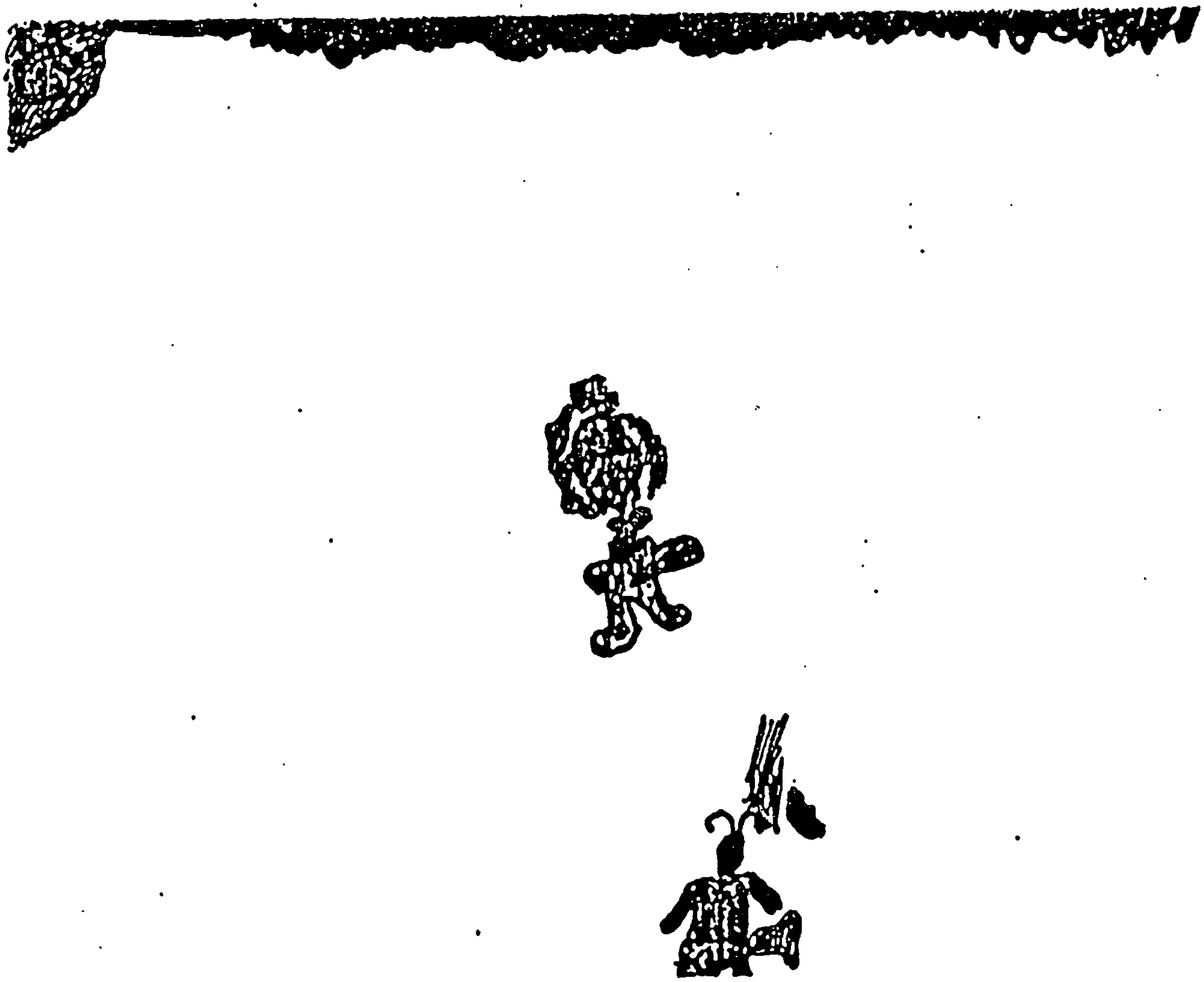


Figure 3. Jake's robot man and flying earthling.

Manuel:	I hope it explodes in the next century.
Jake:	Here comes the bomb explosion! There is the fire, a little smoke. (makes quick back-and-forth motions with his marker) ... [omitted data] It's gonna explode in the next few days.
Manuel:	I hope it happens on the weekend and then I won't be around.
Jake:	Not for long this school will be around. ... (adds another figure) I'm gonna make a flying earthling!

Jake's dynamic narratives were woven with talk and drawing; but his writing was neither dynamic nor narrative. Jake struggled with encoding, and, for support, he "copied offa" his pictures, capturing only its static, flat surface. For his robot man story, he wrote:

> Once upon a time there were two men. One was flying up in to the clouds. The other man was staying on the ground. The and

Over the two years of the project, Jake's social nature and flair for the dramatic did not change—but his composing changed. As a second grader, Jake's drawings often were sequenced to reveal key moments in his story; further, his playful interactions with peers could now occur *during* writing. To give a flavor of these changes, I provide another sample of Jake in action one year after the "robot man" event.

As is his custom, Jake is sitting beside Manuel. While Manuel works on story of a snowman who comes to life, Jake has other plans:

Jake:	(to Manuel) I'm deadly. I'm deadly. I'm gonna put your name in this story and you are gonna be deadly too. I'm gonna make sure you get blown to pieces. (laughs)
Manuel:	Blown to pieces. (softly and a bit awed)
Jake:	Yes sir. You won't be able to see your mommy ever again.

Jake writes, *Once there was a boy that is named Manuel.*

Manuel playfully retaliates:

Manuel:	In my story, you're going to meet a magician who's going to turn *you* into a snowman.
Jake:	Well, actually, guess wha—
Manuel:	And melt you flat.

Jake seems to back down·

Jake: Actually, um, I I'm, I—we're gonna, I'm writing about um us flying the fastest jet in the world.

...

None of us—both of us are—isn't gonna get blown to pieces because it's the fastest jet—it can outrun any bullet.

Manuel: Oh wow! I like that.

Jake: And it's as bullet-proof as it can get.

But later:

Jake: Watch out Manuel! (writes *blow up*)

Manuel: Just at the very end when they're just so happy, it's almost—they're just so happy and they read the entire story and they loved it, I get blown up.

Jake: Yeah.

Manuel: And they cry and cry and cry and cry—it's so dramatic.

Later, Jake reads his story to Manuel:

> Once there was a boy that is named Manuel. Manuel is going to fly the fastest jet and I am going to fly the jet too. But Manuel's headquarters is going to blow up But I am OK. But I don't know about Manuel but I am going to find Manuel. But when I find him I like him. But I think I see him. He is in the jet. Manuel are you OK? yes I am OK. you are being attacked. I will shoot the bad guys out of the universe. OK yet shoot them now. The end.

In this event, as in others in the second grade, Jake played with Manuel, not only around his writing, but through the writing itself.

Defining the viewing frame: Analytic tools. The case record of Jake was filled with the taped voices, written records, and collected products of the many children whose school lives were interwoven with his own. To make sense of Jake's data set—and that of seven of his peers—I took from the literacy dialogue of the mid-eighties a definition of writing as a mediational tool used to participate in social events (Basso, 1974; Heath, 1983): writing is not only a means of representing an individual's meaning; it also serves to mediate relationships between writers and others. Written forms do social work in the world. This definition of writing—this conceptual boundary—would frame both child writer and co-participants in the observed event. Moreover, it would situate any particular event in a larger cultural world within which that event had some function, gained some meaning.

Accompanying new views of literacy were new perspectives on development as well, most notably those inspired by the sociocultural theory of Vygotsky (1962, 1978). These perspectives also would draw a larger boundary around individual children, for those children would be seen as "grow[ing] *into* the intellectual life of those around them" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 77; emphasis added). Vygotskian theory highlighted how children learned through interaction with others, and it emphasized language as the key learning tool; it was language that provided the cultural and cognitive link between child and adult mind and allowed the child to learn the ways of thinking—and the ways of reading and writing—of their society.

In Jake's case, however, the boundaries that "fit" the data were not those of child apprentices to adult-governed worlds (e.g., Heath, 1983; Ninio & Bruner, 1978). The data were gathered through close observation of children, not through close observation of adult/child encounters. And those children had attended mainly to each other; adults had faded in and out of the viewing frame. Thus, in dialogue with both theory and data, I drew my analytic boundaries around children engaged with other children—children brought together and guided by adults in official worlds but children who organized their own life spaces in response to those worlds (Cook-Gumperz, 1981; Corsaro, 1985). Within such boundaries, it seemed possible to gain insight into the sociocultural dynamics of learning to write, that is, of developing control over a mediational tool in the social world of school children.

The research question, then, became, how did writing come to be a useful tool within the social lives and the symbolic repertoire of Jake and his peers? In Jake's case in particular, composing served to mediate his relationship with Manuel, a regular co-participant in his events. And for both boys, writing had meaning in a larger school world in which child stories were tools for both immediate engagement and later appreciation ("Just at the very end ... they read the entire story ... I get blown up"). The picture in Figure 4, by Jake himself, is a kind of pictorial metaphor for Jake's case. It depicts the linked fates of Jake and Manuel: Manuel, who wanted to be an artist, is drawing a picture of Jake, who wanted to be a pilot.

To answer the project question, I developed coding categories to describe how children used talk, pictures, and written texts to create and to enter into their own and others' composed worlds. One set of categories referred to the functions of the children's language, for example to *represent* aspects of real and imaginary situations, to *interact* with others, and to *evaluate* or express their feelings and attitudes. Another set examined the *meaning elements* represented in children's interwoven talk, drawing, and writing, including, for example, objects, actors, actions, placement in space and time (past, present, future), and sensorimotor qualities (direction, force, speed, volume). It was this vocabulary that revealed, for example, that, as a first grader, Jake's narrative talk during drawing moved through time, but his written language was stuck within the static space/time dimensions of his completed picture frame.

Jake pushes boundaries. As the two years of the study passed, Jake and his peers both clarified and complicated the guiding definitions of writing and development. Like Rachel, Jake was a child who used stories to express his feelings about—his evaluations of—the world. But this use was not seen

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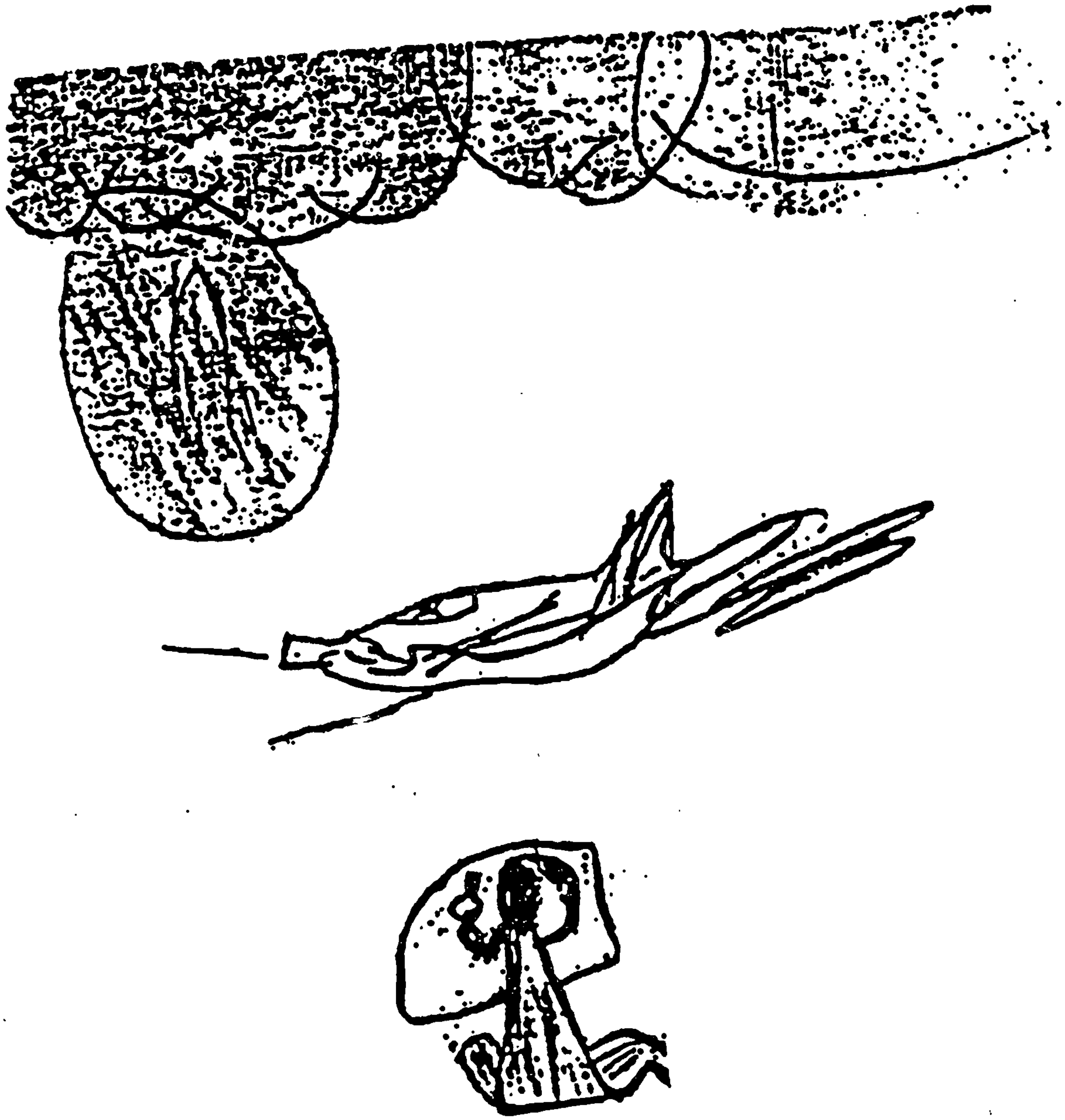

Figure 4. Framing Jake and Manuel.

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simply as an attribute of Jake or as a reflection of his experienced world, nor was his composing seen as a direct reflection of placement along a linear evolution of writing behavior. Rather, Jake's ways of composing, like those of his peers, were seen as shaped at the intersection of his symbolic resources and social intentions, which were themselves influenced by the social structure and interactional possibilities of his classroom, and, more broadly, the culture of his school.

Initially, Jake and his peers used the familiar tools of drawing and talk to participate in journal time. But, gradually, functional shifts occurred: writing itself began to assume more of the social and intellectual work of composing. Thus, a second-grade Jake interacted with—teased—his good friend Manuel through writing as well as through talk. He manipulated the words on the page in order to manipulate Manuel. Moreover, he used evaluative techniques (Labov & Waletzky, 1967), like suspending narrative action at critical points (e.g., "I am OK but I don't know about Manuel"), to express his feelings about his world (especially his consistent theme of friends threatened but saved, by him of course).

But Jake's talk did not become less important; for Jake and his peers, as for academics, texts became the center of—embedded in—social interactions and intellectual debates. In fact, it was this embedding that fueled and guided his writing. Jake *was not moving away from the social world*; he was learning new ways of engaging with it.

As the preceding analysis of Jake's writing and development suggests, my interpretive methodology and my guiding definitions of writing—as mediational tool in sociocultural events—were more compatible than they had been in the cases of Rachel and her peers. Still, these new boundaries around Jake and his classmates began to fray even as they took form. And one reason was simply time. It is different to spend two years with a child, rather than a few months, as with Rachel. Jake was not just a child writer; he was a complex character—a peer among children, a sometimes struggling student, and, he hoped, a "tough" and "slick" kid. His choices of topic, characters, and plot events, his way of interacting with others about his texts—all said something about Jake's relationship to his social world and, perhaps, to the ideological one as well (e.g., to being a boy, a vulnerable child in what he regarded as the tough and "crazy part" of the city).

And yet, the specifics of content choices and, more broadly, of sociocultural identity did not figure in any prominent way in Jake's case. But this changed in Tina's school.

Tina: Writing as Social and Ideological Dialogue

In Geertz's (1973, p. 23) words, one can "study different things in different places"—and Tina's school was a place in which issues of identity became strikingly visible. Her urban K-3 school served primarily two neighborhoods, one an African American, low-income and working class community, where Tina lived, and the other, an integrated but primarily European American working and middle class community. At the preceding school, Jake's close friends had included children from diverse ethnic backgrounds, most of whom lived in his integrated working class neighborhood. Tina's close friends were also from her neighborhood, but it was not integrated. Tina, like most of her peers, interacted with those from across the economic divide primarily in official school activities.

Thus, studying child literacy in the context of child social relationships brought into the viewing frame the interrelated issues of race, class, gender, and culture. Indeed, in my first study at this site, I examined how young child composers made use of diverse cultural resources—the discourse traditions of their home community, those of the popular media, and those stressed in school (Dyson, 1993a).

The second project at the site (Dyson, 1995) began on an informal visit to Tina's second grade classroom during writing time, when I noticed the pervasiveness of superheroes, figures like teen-age ninjas (both the human and the "mutant turtle" variety) and X-men (a team of mutant humans, both women and men, with great powers). These superheroes were especially visible during an optional practice named "Author's Theater" by the children's teacher, Kristin; in this practice, the children chose classmates to act out their written stories.

Given that popular media stories appeal to children's ideologically-informed desires as members of particular gender and age groups and, less directly, of particular ethnicities and socioeconomic circumstances (Kline, 1993), I wondered how such stories figured into the social and literacy life of Kristin's children (e.g., who wrote such stories, to be enacted by whom, with what sort of changes over time in textual content and structure). Although superhero stories were written primarily by boys, some girls did evidence interest—all working class girls, among them, Tina.

A tiny child with large glasses, Tina was a complex character, one who voiced a strong sense of identity as an African American, as a caring person who "love[d] the world," and as a "tough" kid. "She thinks just because I'm small," that "I can't beat her up," said Tina one day in the midst of a verbal (or rather chillingly silent) fight with her good friend Makeda, "But I'll show her." The complexity of Tina—and her intense reaction to being excluded from anybody's story world—is evident in the summarized drama below.

The drama—and dramas—of Tina. For weeks, the boys in Tina's second grade class had been writing stories for Author's Theater about ninjas, ninja turtles, and X-men—and, for weeks, Tina had been begging for a part to play, with no luck at all. The only boy who regularly included girls in superhero dramas was Sammy, and he, like other boys, picked only Melissa or Sarah, two slender, middle class, and outgoing white girls—just as were the ninja's "foxy babes" in the popular media stories.

In actuality, neither Melissa nor Sarah campaigned for these roles; indeed, they were not allowed to watch such movies and cartoons. In this classroom, evidenced knowledge of popular media superheroes was related to both gender and class. That is, working class girls, like Tina, generally could carry on informed discussions about these characters, even though they did not write about them. And yet, despite their knowledge and, in some cases, their active campaigning for roles, they were regularly excluded.

Tina had had it. Usually, when she wrote in her journal (entitled "The Peace Book"), she wrote brief texts expressing her love of family and friends. But on this day, Tina enticed her best friend Holly to write a superhero story with her. "And no boys," she said firmly, "'cause the boys doesn't let us play."

Sitting side-by-side, Tina and Holly began playfully to plan an X-men story. (X-men stories were particularly appealing, since the X-men superhero team includes "strong" and "tough" girls, including girl of color.) When the children began, Tina planned to be the X-men character Rogue. But she quickly became "the toughest guy in the world.... We're all Blobs!" (Blobs are huge, fleshy mutant humans, virtually indestructible and very bad guys.) "'Cause if somebody threw a metal ball at me, the energy go right through me and I would never know. And we're sisters robbing the world.... And we'll never get sick. And we'll never die."

The sisters evolved, Tina becoming Uncle Blob, Holly niece Blob. As the girls became more and more animated, they moved to the classroom rug, deep in play. In the drama, Uncle Blob Tina captured the female X-Men character Rogue, cutting off her long hair. Uncle Blob drank that hair, absorbing its fiery power, giving just a small bit to his begging niece Holly Blob. "The only thing you can do," he tells the girl, "is just shoot out fire at them [the X-men] and then just call me." (There are shades here of the ninja stories and of the girls who call for help.)

Class composing time ended before the children had put pencil to paper. The next day Tina was absent, and so each girl eventually authored her own X-men story. However, given the intensity of peer pressure, each girl also found it impossible to write the planned drama. For example, on the day Tina attempted to write her X-men story, both girls and boys begged for powerful good-guy roles—and expressed great unhappiness with the unapologetic bad guys Tina had in mind. This pressure resulted in a story without the Blob family but, also, a story without the usual good guys-defeat-the-bad-guys encounter. Following is an edited excerpt from Tina's story:

> Once there were 4 X-men [Storm, Rogue, Jean Gray, and Archangel].
> And the X-men fought others.
> One X-men died.
> And the rest of them were
> sad. They cried.

This was an unusual superhero story for her class: there was a predominance of women, enacted primarily by girls of color; there was also a death among the good guys; and, most strikingly, a good cry by the superheroes. During the peer enactment of her story, Tina reinforced the disruption of the usual gendered order:

Tina: (reading) "One of the X-men *died* ... And the rest were very sad. They cried." Everybody [all of the child actors] cry now, even the *boys*.

As a third grader, Tina temporarily abandoned her interest in X-men stories—"too boyish," she explained; indeed, she even wrote a superhero story featuring a female victim ("Batman will save us girls," she wrote, "Hurry Batman hurry."). And yet, she consistently campaigned for roles in boys' superhero stories, roles in which sometimes "the girls win."

Moreover, in February of her third-grade year, she began once again writing (and once again involving classmates in) stories that displayed diverse gender relations, among them lovers or spouses, perpetrators/rescuers/victims, disciplinarian/disciplined, nurturer/nurtured, and teammates, with males and females in varied role combinations. And, as in the second grade, Tina's stories were linked to ongoing class issues and particular interpersonal engagements.

For example, in the last month of school, Tina wrote a superhero story that included diverse female/male roles. Moreover, it included both superhero themes from the popular media and information from a class unit on the superheroes of ancient Greece. In that unit, Tina chose Venus, goddess of beauty, as her project topic, as did her friend Makeda. Sitting side by side, Tina and Makeda initially drew Venus as fair-haired and white. Lena, also at their table, drew her goddess Black, but commented that she was sure it was "wrong," because "people from Greece are not Black."

"Yes, they can be," countered Tina. When Makeda reiterated that her Venus was white, Tina commented, "Well, maybe she's white to you, but not to me." And Tina (and later Makeda) drew a Black goddess as well. Moreover, Tina wrote the piece excerpted below, in which Venus, whose middle name is Tina, saves the world for both boys and girls:

> Once there was a boy and girl in the park and two men was walking by the park and the men saw the two kids. So the two men started to run after them. And the kids ran. One man chased the girl the other ran after the boy. The boy name was Aloyse [a classmate] and the [girl] name was Asia [her sister]. So when Venus Tina heard about this she was mad. So she came down ... and picked the kids up on her magical flying horse named Makeda. It was a girl horse and she took the two kids ... in the sky. There was a big park on a cloud. There was a lot of kids play[ing] on flying horses. It was kids from [Tina's] school.... Then she took them home. They said what about those two mean men. Venus Tina made them nice. And on earth was fun again. She made parks safe for us kids of the world. By Tina. Love Tina.

Defining the viewing frame: Analytic tools. In Tina's case study, the child in the viewing frame was interacting with others in the local situation but, at the same time, that local interaction was substantiating—and, in some ways, challenging—interactions that took place beyond the classroom walls. Understanding such complexity required a perspective on literacy that made explicit provision for the ideological dimension of language use.

Thus, I appropriated the language of Bakhtin's dialogism (1981, 1986; Volosinov, 1973), a theoretical perspective gaining increased visibility in the literacy dialogue of the nineties. From a Bakhtinian vantage point, the conceptual boundary around Tina would include her interactional partners in the immediate social scene, just as it had in Jake's case. But the voices within that context would have ideological echoes. That is, from a dialogic perspective, writers not only use words in particular situations to interact with others; but they also adopt or resist the expected words, the words available to them in those situations as women or men, as people of varied ages and heritages, of different roles, statuses and dispositions.

Moreover, this vantage point also suggested new visions of development. In these visions, children were not unproblematically "growing into the intellectual life of those around them" (Vygotsky, 1978 p. 77). Rather, they were also growing into, or in some way against, the existent social order through which that life was enacted. Social identification and social conflict—not only internal psycholinguistic conflicts and interactional guidance—influence the direction of learning (Dyson, 1995; Goodnow, 1990). Thus, my research question became, what is the nature of the interplay between the changing interactional and ideological dynamics of individual children's classroom lives and the changing nature of their writing processes and products?

A pictorial metaphor for Tina's case in particular might be the product in Figure 5, which Tina drew during her third grade lapse in social activism. Tina juxtaposed symbolic material: the words *no no X-men* ("too boyish," she had said) and, underneath, large, colorful depictions of Aladdin and Princess Jasmine, the romantic pair from a popular fantasy movie. Tina's product was clearly rooted in the social world of her classroom *and* in the ideological world as well.

To construct Tina's case, I used ethnographic analysis of all class members' official and unofficial discussions of gender, race, and power (i.e., strength) *and* case study analysis of the content and structure of the writing and talking of the focal children, including Tina.

Just as in the cases of Rachel and Jake, many children in Tina's room initially made minimal use of actual print. Indeed, their written texts functioned primarily as *props* for (or, more accurately, as "tickets" to) the theater: their texts were largely invisible; they stood up and pretended to read texts that were not actually written. And, as in Jake's case, over time children's texts became more central to their social life in this classroom. In this project, however, I aimed to detail the children's social goals and the precise ways in which texts mediate those goals.

Thus, I constructed a category system to describe the children's social goals (e.g., affiliating with others, resisting them, or, more equitably, negotiating with them) and, also, the way in which the written texts served those goals. For example, their texts could serve as *representations of valued characters and actions*, as *reinforcers of their authority as authors*, their right to say how the world is, and as *dialogic mediators* between themselves and others, as ways of anticipating and responding to others' reactions to their stories.

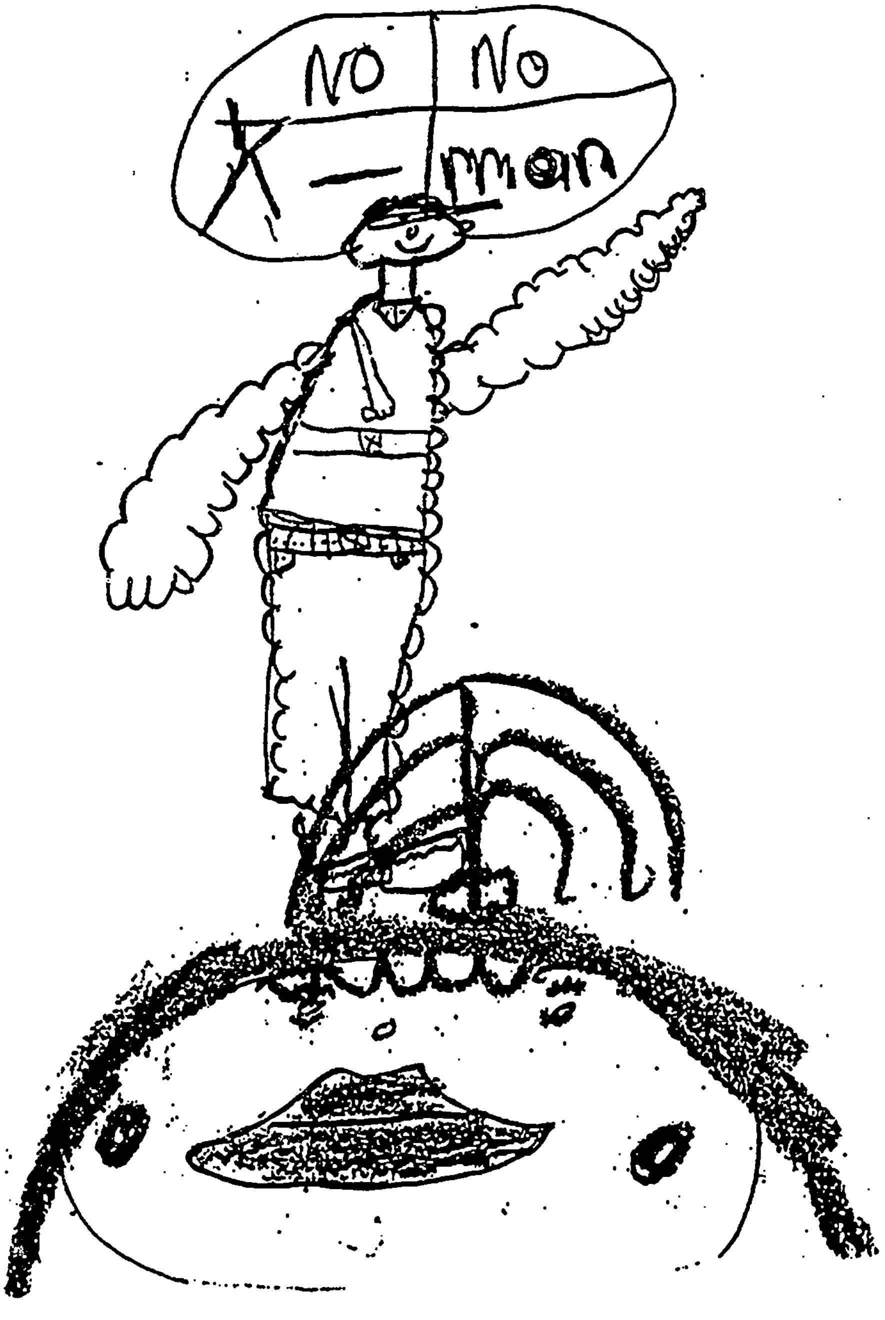

Figure 5. Framing Tina's social and ideological world.

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Tina pushes boundaries. The data analysis for this project is ongoing as of this writing. Still, the initial construction of Tina's case has further clarified and complicated perspectives on writing and its development and, moreover, on the potential use of case study methodology itself. To construct the case of Rachel, a child's writing was set against the backdrop of a developmental scheme of child literacy. To construct the case of Jake, a child's writing was first situated within the interactional dynamics of his daily school life. To construct the case of Tina, a case informed by Bakhtinian theory, that writing was also set within the *ideological* dynamics of her classroom community; and those dynamics sometimes foregrounded gender, race, or class.

The goal of the ongoing project is not to compare individual cases who represent particular categories (e.g., to compare a representative boy to a representative girl, or a representative Black child to a representative white child). Rather, the goal is to examine how individuals (like Tina) participate in the classroom context as a whole and the interplay between the interactional and ideological dynamics of that classroom life and the particulars of their ways of writing. Gender, race, or class are included in the analysis when they are foregrounded in those dynamics, that is, when they are underscored in the social conversation being furthered through writing. (Such a perspective on gender, race, and class is consistent with poststructuralist theory, which emphasizes the fluid nature of sociocultural identity; see, for example, Williams, 1991.)

In Tina's case, her ways of writing were interrelated with the micropolitics of the classroom. Thus, social conflicts—not only social interactions—helped make salient for her new kinds of writing choices, newly imagined ways of depicting human relationships. What I as an adult might label an ideological critique did not originate from teacher-led critical discussions, but from child-initiated and teacher-supported objections to perceptions of unfair play. That is, Tina did not initiate criticisms of textual representations in and of themselves (e.g., she did not object to women being "sexual objects" in media stories); she reacted to exclusion. For example, she raised the issue of race when she felt excluded from being a "goddess," of gender when excluded from being a "good guy."

In both the first and the second grade, Tina's ways of developing her texts (e.g., the characters she included, the elaborations of basic descriptions and actions she added) were linked, in part, to ongoing class discussions about issues of gender, which were interrelated in complex ways with those of race, and, in the third grade, sexual orientation. In Bakhtin's sense, Tina had something important to "say" in the ongoing class conversation. For example, in her Venus story, Tina notes that both the boy and the girl were subject to the same fate (i.e., being chased by the mean men), and she explicitly marks the flying horse as a girl horse, as Makeda.

Further, Tina was not only developing her own text. She was a key player in the classroom collective; she "talked back" (hooks, 1990), raising issues that reverberated in the class and caused others to rethink—not in grand moments of collective classroom revolution, but in small moments of shifting positions. For instance, urged on by the resistance of her tough friend Tina (and encouraged by her approving teacher Kristin), Makeda imagined a Black Venus, despite the classroom books filled exclusively with fair-haired and light-skinned goddesses.

Just as Tina stretched the meaning of "Venus" in the local culture of her classroom to include her, so too the construction of her case has involved stretching definitions of literacy and of development to include the complexity of her experiences. Thus, like Rachel and Jake, Tina's case is providing material to think with, particularly, material to consider the interrelated ideological and interpersonal dynamics of learning to write. To use Geertz's words, Tina's case does not move from "already proven theorems to newly proven ones," but rather "plung[es]" more deeply into the same thing, that is, into the experience of learning to write (1973, p. 25).

SHIFTING CONTEXTS:
THE ROLE OF CASES IN PROFESSIONAL DIALOGUE

What, then, is the role of case studies in the repertoire of scholarly ways of studying literacy? What professional contribution can be made through close observation of small numbers of children, given the thousands of children in our schools?

To answer that question, one might turn it on itself and ask, what *can* be done with thousands of children *but* count them? In mass, children—and the challenges they present—are faceless, nameless, and overwhelming. But these massive numbers of children are not isolated individuals; they are social participants included, or so we hope, in particular classrooms and schools, in particular institutions and communities.

Through interpretive case studies, researchers offer educators in these places no specific laws of causation, no precise predictions of the outcomes of one teaching strategy or another. But they do offer, through the richness of singular experiences, opportunities to consider the complexities of teaching and learning by embedding them within the details of everyday life in school. It is precisely those details that account for the tremendous potential of case studies *both* to further and stifle professional dialogue.

Providing a Basis for Dialogue

In its careful grounding of important abstractions in mundane particulars, case study research offers diverse professionals a means for identifying and talking about the dimensions and dynamics of living and learning in classrooms (and other settings as well). As Hymes (1972, p. xiv) noted in his discussion of educational ethnography, careful studies of particular classrooms and communities make available

> helpful perspectives and insights but for them to be effective in a classroom, they must be articulated in terms of the features of that classroom and its community context. The

> participants in the situation must themselves in effect be ethnographers of their own situation. [For them, research] can suggest new things to notice, reflect upon, and do ... [But] in the last analysis, it is the understanding and insight of those in the concrete situation that will determine the outcome.

The illustrative cases in this report all focused on the dimensions and dynamics of learning to write. In each case, children's engagement with literacy—and the observer's visions of child literacy—were shaped by the social situations in which they found themselves. And those situations were interpreted differently by children from different sociocultural backgrounds and, indeed, by children with different personal dispositions, interests, and styles. Thus, the cases yielded, not prescriptions for practice, but material for reflection about particular aspects of the situated nature of learning to write.

For example, the cases illustrated ways in which the symbolic resources available to children matter. Educators in diverse settings might ask, is it possible for children to, and do particular children choose to, accompany their writing with drawing or drama, with collaborative talk? What challenges do such media present (e.g., the challenge of transforming dramatic sound effects to black and white squiggles, static pictures to dynamic narratives)?

Further, the cases illustrated ways in which official and unofficial social dynamics matter to classroom learning. Children's social goals influence their ways of writing, as do their social partners, including those they write with and those they write for. Moreover, the sorts of public forums available for public sharing and community building are worthy of consideration. Educators might consider, what sort of public participation is possible? With what sort of assumed purpose and expected response? If purpose or response is altered, do and how do patterns of participation change?

Finally, classroom texts (both child- and adult-authored) generate their own set of possibilities and constraints. Educators might consider if, and how, the literate culture (i.e., the dominant topics, themes, genres) figure into the ideological and interpersonal dynamic of the class. Are there points of tension? of children written out (or written in) by others in ways that are uncomfortable for them? How is—could—such discomfort be evidenced?

Just as important as such potential points of reflection anticipated by a researcher are those that are unanticipated. Teachers and other professionals in diverse roles bring their own concerns and vantage points to the details of specific cases (Florio-Ruane, 1991). As Genishi (1992) notes, teachers in particular are interventionists who construct "theories of practice" (p. 198) that will help them take action to support the individuals in their classrooms. Their particular perspectives may cause them to foreground different research details or data, to identify different dynamics. For example, Florio-Ruane (1991) discusses how teachers responded to data gathered in their own classrooms by raising unanticipated issues about "contextual constraints that arise from outside the classroom" (p. 252), issues involving parents, administrators, textbook publishers, and politicians, among others.

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Differing vantage points on the particularities of classroom life could be remarkably productive for all concerned. Indeed, they might contribute to the envisioned democratic participation in educational knowledge-creation discussed by Hymes (1972). As he notes, outside researchers can offer new perspectives, connecting local circumstances to overarching issues and to nonlocal but relevant experiences. But insiders by virtue of being insiders have access to the possibilities and problems of particular situations, access denied those whose participation is structured, at least in part, by theoretical and methodological demands. And yet, the very details that may contribute to dialogic encounters may also contribute to the rigidity of conceptual and professional boundaries.

Constructing Rigid Boundaries

When case study research yields texts of "classroom implications," details of behavior may be separated from the social and cultural circumstance that made those details locally sensible, and they may be separated as well from the conceptual issues that make those details nonlocally useful as material for reflection. Thus made anemic, case studies may give rise to illegal prescriptions, to suspect normative guides. Indeed, the very nature of researchers' written reports may infuse them with the artificial prescriptive authority of the distanced expert (Florio-Ruane, 1991).

For example, the "emergent literacy" behaviors of selected young children in particular settings have been represented as set "stages," as behaviors to be expected from other children in other contexts, children with different resources and end goals, children who may follow different developmental paths (for critiques, see Dyson, 1993b; Sahni, 1994). Interpretive methodology *is* used to ask basic developmental questions about changes over time in children's ways of participating in the everyday activities of family, peer, and community life (e.g., Corsaro & Miller, 1992; Heath, 1983; Schieffelin, 1990). But exactly what sorts of child responses are universal, at what level of specificity, are questions, not taken-for-granted assumptions (Gaskins, Miller, & Corsaro, 1992).

Such caution is necessary, because people learn to read and write at different ages, with different guiding intentions and available materials, with the support of varied co-participants, cultural resources, and symbolic tools (Farr, 1994; Sahni, 1994). First-grader Jake, for example, differed markedly from other portraits of beginning writers: he did not view writing as play (cf. Graves, 1983); he did not make extensive use of "invented" spellings (cf. Bissex, 1980); nor did he have any particular interest in writing personal narratives (cf. Sowers, 1985). The purpose of interpretive case studies is not to contribute to rigid developmental portraits. Rather, it is to gain insight into the complexity of literacy learning; any proposed universals must come from comparisons of cases carefully situated within diverse social circumstances.

This potential weakness—this use of detail, not to think with, but to prescribe from—also can occur in reference to teacher, rather than child, behavior. The specific procedures of specific teachers in specific school settings may become suggested "methods," instructional scripts, which are then transferred to other settings and other participants with different human and material resources, and different curricular possibilities (e.g., Bartolome, 1994; Reyes, 1992). Case studies may thus become ideological tools that help transform human variety into human deficiency.

Such a use of case study details—with its accompanying dismissal of situational complexity and theoretical depth—is antithetical to the very nature of case studies. Indeed, it is precisely because such a use *is* inappropriate that case study methodology has the potential to further true professional dialogue. To return to Hymes' (1972) insights, case studies may yield new ways of paying attention to, and potentially intervening in, the dimensions and dynamics of child learning in classrooms; but the transformation of new perspectives into specific interventions depends on the professional judgment of professional educators in particular circumstances.

Talking across Boundaries

In the introduction of this paper, Makeda said that a story was "kinda like *your* life," and, in a very fundamental sense, she was right. Stories, including those we tell about other people, are also about ourselves, written from our particular vantage points. In interaction, each speaker or writer infuses given words like literacy and development with new accents, new dimensions, because each is positioned differently in the social and ideological ground. Crossing conceptual boundaries is thus linked with crossing human ones: when we, with our diverse experiences and our common concerns, converse, we push each other out of bounds, we help each other attend to the world a bit differently.

Such ongoing conversation about children, teaching, and schooling is critical. Even in one school district teachers work in an amazing array of classroom situations, greeting children who bring to school diverse language and cultural resources, varied histories and relationships with literacy and, moreover, with educational and societal institutions. Rigid curricula and rigid teaching based on narrow visions of children's lives will not help teachers in their work. Moreover, not only is there present diversity, chronologically, the contextual ground of education is always shifting; our ways of thinking and talking about children and education are grounded in particular historical, intellectual, and cultural conditions (Cherryholmes, 1988).

Promoting conversation will require changes of institutional organization and epistemological visions beyond the focus of this report. But surely, one possible means for bringing adults out of their own distinctive professional boundaries and into common conversation is a mutual interest in, appreciation of, and pleasure in knowing the young. When studied in depth, individual children emerge from the shadows, as Sammy did from the underworld, potentially enriching the ongoing conversation about literacy, development, and schooling.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Support for this work was provided by the Spencer Foundation and by the Educational Research and Development Center Program (grant number R117G10036 for the National Center for the Study of Writing) as administered by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI), U.S. Department of Education. The findings and opinions expressed in this report do not reflect the position or policies of the Spencer Foundation, OERI, or the U.S. Department of Education.

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